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# An (Un)usual Teaching Team

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## Abstract

In this article we (Moravej ‘the nutrition lecturer’ and Nerantzi ‘the academic developer’) outline our experience of working on a team-taught module. Both had worked together on an undergraduate module the nutrition lecturer teaches and had undertaken some research together using playful approaches to module evaluations. When the nutrition lecturer invited the academic developer to co-develop and team teach the postgraduate module Nutrition in Practice she could not resist. Team-teaching in this case was a choice. A choice to collaborate and experiment together with creative approaches to learning and teaching and further develop practice through this process (Minett-Smith & Davis, 2019). Academic developers work, most of the time, directly with academic staff. They are usually a layer removed from the students. This article reports a situation for both the ‘lecturer’ and the ‘developer’ when the situation was changed. What follows are reflections by the nutrition lecturer and the academic developer about their team-teaching experience.

**Keywords:** Team-teaching, professional development, creativity, nutritional sciences

## 1. Introduction

In this article, we (Moravej ‘the nutrition lecturer’ and Nerantzi ‘the academic developer’) outline our experience of working on a team-taught module and our reflections on this experience using our authentic voices. The nutrition lecturer invited the academic developer to co-develop and team teach the postgraduate module Nutrition in Practice, part of the MSc in Human Nutrition at the same institution. The academic developer is located in a central learning and teaching unit that supports colleagues across the

institution in their professional development, curriculum design activities and supports scholarship in this area. The nutrition lecturer splits her works between one of the faculties and in professional services. Team teaching in this case was a choice and seen as an opportunity to experiment with creative approaches to stimulate learning through this alternative professional development intervention (Minett-Smith & Davis, 2019). Both had worked together before on team teaching on the PgCert in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education at the same institution.

## 2. Moravej's 'take' on the experience of working with the developer

For our Nutrition in Practice (NIP) module, Nerantzi was like an architect guiding me in what materials I could use and what would make the metaphorical roof and the flooring of the module stronger. I was the builder making sure the bricks and the windows and the theory were incorporated everywhere but not as a boring piece of information or death by PowerPoint. We wanted students to feel empowered, ask questions and I wanted them to see us as partners and facilitators in their professional and personal development. I wanted students to learn about high-quality trusted collaboration, which they will have to be part of when they graduate.

I was really excited about our first session together but unfortunately Nerantzi was ill and unable to join us. We had discussed what we were going to do together so I was confident on what had to be done in our first session, which was building a community and breaking the barriers.

We were going to explore the multicultural dimensions of the group and learn about each other. The multicultural dimension was extremely important as we wanted to harness what students brought, maximise on their diversity and experiences to create a cross-cultural and inclusive student experiences. We wanted each student to feel they belonged to our unique NIP community. When students feel they belong, and they are valued for who they are and what they bring to the class their learning, self-esteem and motivation is enhanced.

I was slightly concerned that students would know everything about each other as NIP was their last module of the year. I was wrong as students loved sharing their personal information and which countries they were from by marking them on the map of the world I had provided for them. They really wanted to learn about each other.

I wanted to make sure students were aware that Nerantzi was fully part of our community even when she was not physically in the room so I became the messenger between student population and Nerantzi. I

updated her after each session about what we had done and the feedback from students. I went into the module knowing that this was the first time I was team teaching and I was not alone making all the decisions. As a creative individual, I am particularly resistant to receiving ideas from others especially when they disrupt my ways of doing things. I am open to giving ideas but prefer to experiment alone as I am interested in putting my "unique stamp" and express my own way of doing things, especially if it is the first time running a unit. I trusted Nerantzi and her ideas as she was respectful of mine. It was always about enhancement of the unit and student engagement and experience.

I never felt my ideas were ignored and diminished and this is why I never felt I had to defend or fight for my ideas as I usually do with others and previous units. This was refreshing and created a natural harmony. Nerantzi listened carefully to everything and offered more ideas on what we were going to do. We did not agree on everything and sometimes we changed what we had planned for the classroom but we always respected each other's ideas and views.

Nerantzi joined us for the third session and talked about professional identity, social eating, the power of storytelling and adding new dimensions to the module. With Nerantzi in the classroom, I could watch her and the students and how they interacted. This is usually not possible beyond basic observation as a solo lecturer in charge of delivery of content and answering questions. By observing, I could see more on how to engage certain students that maybe were less talkative and reinforce certain concepts after Nerantzi's delivery. I have never used storytelling in my teaching so I was open to idea when Nerantzi shared a short personal story that she had written about her father in hospital. By the end of it, everyone in the class was emotional. She brought emotional intelligence to the class and made students realise that nutrition in isolation without considering the social setting, people's emotions and feelings they will be less effective as nutrition experts.

I was also less worried about my workload of the module as I knew I could rely on Nerantzi. I became more productive than my usual self and became open to more collaborative ideas. In one of our lab sessions,

Nerantzi suggested I get video feedback from students about their cooking experience using my mobile phone to add a digital dimension, and then to share it on Twitter for students to continue learning from each other beyond the lab session. The students loved this and I was very surprised at how much more they were talking when they realised they were being filmed. This continued for every practical session. We now have a video collection that could be used by the students as evidence of their efforts while they were learning about NIP in different settings such as schools, hospitals, care homes and prisons.

The team teaching allowed ongoing reflection of what worked and what didn't. We reflected in the sessions and based on what the students needed we changed direction or moved our ideas. Just before a session, sometimes, Nerantzi or I would come up with a great idea to enhance our teaching or add another layer of thinking for students to keep the unit relevant and real. Working with Nerantzi boosted my morale and enthusiasm for teaching a new community of learners.

Everything from mid-module evaluation using LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® to the planting of chilli plants in pots in the class to using storytelling in different nutritional settings using personal experiences of Nerantzi enhanced our understanding. Students benefitted from this partnership as they could see how exceptional partnership could work in real life. It broke the boredom of just having one lecturer for the whole module as well. Team teaching gave our students access to two visions, two teaching methods, two brains, two different cultures and distinct personalities.

I also learnt a lot more from Nerantzi on how she moves around the classroom and how she uses various objects to drive the community of learners to think differently. And on how she sometimes puts students on the spot with her questions to push them out of their comfort zone. I had to adopt my teaching to accommodate Nerantzi in my classroom. My classroom became 'ours' and my students became 'ours'. We became one community with shared values and goals. Students felt a sense of belonging and motivation to take part in all the discussions, to cook and showcase their learning and individual talents.

As a result of this collaborative experience, I feel that I have grown as an academic. I realise it was wonderful to work with someone who wanted to listen to my initial vision for the unit but also wanted to take it to the next level. There were so many extra layers of creativity, authenticity and "humanness" to NIP, which offered students a holistic and fulfilling experience. It also provided me with personal enrichment and a deeper appreciation for what academic developers can do to enhance and improve teaching of academic colleagues in a trusting and thriving environment.

### **3. Nerantzi's 'take' on working on a student module alongside a regular academic**

Moravej and I met a few months after I joined ManMet over five years ago. Our shared passion for creative experimentation in learning and teaching brought us together. Team teaching can happen in different ways: among academic colleagues from similar or different disciplines but also academic colleagues and support staff. White, Henley and Brabston's (1998) team teaching models (interactive, participant-observer and parallel/sequential model) are useful when reflecting on what we did, how and why. Our approach was a mixture of these models and created learning opportunities for students that were varied and exposed them to different perspectives, but the message was a common one. Research shows that team teaching is generally well received and seen as beneficial by students but can also cause confusion and disorientation, especially if there is no agreement or there are conflicting voices or power struggles (Minett-Smith & Davis, 2019). In our case, we feel that it worked as our approach was collegial and collaborative and also provided valuable opportunities for shared reflection and evaluation of practice. Stefani (2003) illustrated the positive impact of academic development on academics when collaboration and partnership models are used and we have experienced this in practice.

I treasure the opportunities to teach students you are not academic colleagues. Often, I create these opportunities and I think academic developers should do this as part of their professional role. Being a lecturer/teacher whilst an academic developer is important too. I used to teach German in my last

institution and found it always useful in my discussions with colleagues to share my stories about my undergraduate students. It does make a difference. My experience showed that it helps develop trust. However, I have not come across many universities where this is actively promoted or built into the academic development role. With Moravej, we planned the module for some months in advance and our meetings were always full of ideas and excitement.

So what does an academic developer do in a class when she knows nothing about the subject beyond liking good food, healthy eating and cooking? Well, with Moravej we discussed not so much the what was going to be taught in this module but more the how and why. Yanamandram and Noble (2005), in their team-teaching study in a large undergraduate class, found that the most important factor in team teaching is the quality of teaching itself and much less the subject knowledge. This boosted my confidence that this could work.

In a way we really moved away from content delivery to bringing the curriculum alive through stimulating, varied and hands-on experiences to help the students think and enable them to discover their own areas within nutrition and to develop as professionals. This happened through a wide range of approaches we employed that transformed learning into a full body, heart and mind experience. Collectively, we listened, discussed, we made, we played, we cried and we questioned. We all learnt. Emotions are so important in learning. Often we ignore them, we brush them under the carpet. But when we work with people it is really important to remember we all have an emotional dimension too. And this emotional connection can be made strongly through stories. Moon (2010) states:

*A good story seems to facilitate listeners and the teller in moving around in the psychological space of the story, guided by the unfolding actions of the story. For the listener to allow herself vicariously to experience the 'story world' involves her in 'suspending her disbelief' and thereby suspending some current connections with the here and now. She allows herself to be transported 'aboard' the story and may encounter different reality (p.60).*

The story I shared, I felt enabled this. I enjoy creative writing, story-making and storytelling and often use it in my work as an academic developer. While the story was based on a personal experience, the reaction it generated and the emotional involvement it triggered showed that it was a powerful strategy. I suspect we will all remember the story and connect it with something very specific we learnt.

The use of a social media, process and product portfolio, owned by the students, was invaluable and put the students in charge of their learning and development (Scully, O'Leary & Brown, 2018). We normalised the use of technologies in and outside the classroom and created opportunities to help students develop as professionals using digital tools, platforms and spaces. I was impressed with the professionalism of the students and how responsibly they have embraced digital technologies for their learning. Students used an individual online portfolio, seamlessly capturing classroom activities and assessment, and sharing and showcasing their work more widely in order to establish a professional space and online presence in readiness for a career in nutrition science.

Doing the mid-module evaluation with the students was insightful. We used a variation of the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® method to gain insights into the individual and collective experience in class using a playful and hands-on learning approach that enabled deeper reflection. We combined our strategy with further learning and teaching approaches and materials as we felt that it would further strengthen sharing and dialogic engagement (James & Nerantzi, 2018). Students were invited to construct two mini-models, one representing what they were taking away from the module to date and one for what they would find useful to change/happen in the module before the end. We asked our students to add a caption for each model on a post-it and then sticker voting took place when the models were shared. In this way, everything that was shared was transparent, and we could react and respond and also clarify and better understand what was said and what could be done to resolve it. It was fantastic to hear how well the module was perceived and importantly that the students felt they had learnt new things and found the practical sessions useful for

their development. We evaluated this creative approach and wrote an article about it with two students (Nerantzi, Moravej, Silva, & Iosifidou, in print).

#### 4. Lessons learnt & implications for practice

Team teaching between academic and academic developer is something that is valuable for both sides. It develops working relationships and a mutual understanding of each other's role. It is a valuable opportunity for the academic developer to teach students who are not members of staff and for the academic to work critically and creatively with a colleague on the design, implementation and evaluation of their teaching. Team teaching with an academic developer is exciting for a lecturer because the lecturer can witness different teaching theories in action live and with a group of students linked to an individual specialist discipline.

Academics are open to change and transformation as they care deeply about their students. They put a lot of energy into creating stimulating learning experiences. This really drives what they do. They value the opportunity to work with somebody they trust when seen as an equal to consider alternative approaches that have the potential benefit to students. As a lecturer, trust is the most important quality when it comes to trying new learning experiences. The academic developer can step in and enhance the teaching quality throughout the classroom teaching or beyond lecturing during reflection. There is no competition between academic developer and lecturer, only collaborative experiences.

We need to trust our colleagues and we need to trust our students. Creating a sense of community is what makes a real difference and develops trust within. The academic plays a key role in laying the foundations for such a community to emerge and establish. There is no limit to learning and team-teaching gives lecturers an opportunity to learn and grow themselves using the mentorship of the academic developers. Lecturers can enhance their teaching skills, work up to their fullest potential and along with that their creativity, motivation and team management skills get a boost too as there is someone working with them who wants them to improve and grow in a trusted environment.

Empowering students to pursue their own special



interests that are linked to a module and programme of study that builds in choice increases their engagement and commitment to their own development. Creating a sense of openness to ask questions and bringing students own individual and diverse and multicultural experiences to the module promoted a sense of richness and inclusion that students and staff were all learning from each other in every session. There was no fear of being judged by students and learning was enhanced, perhaps even transformed.

Diversity boosts collaboration. We saw this in action. Students were curious about each other and keen to learn with and from each other. Sharing diverse experiences with each other helped them connect their reality with others and build a wider understanding of differences, culturally, politically, economically and socially. Diversity promoted student growth and reflection. When students learnt about other perspectives, and experiences, they tended to reflect on and respond to that information in a positive fashion. It also enhanced a sense of empathy and cultural awareness that I (Nerantzi) had not observed in other modules Diversity discussions allowed students to feel unique, yet part of a group. Diversity within the student community was explored, discussed, and celebrated right from the first session. Every student is unique and an individual. But students often feel grouped at university. Students explored their individual diversity, from their ethnicity all the way

down to their immediate family by sharing stories linked to nutrition.

Team teaching was an alternative to professional development for both authors through which their relationship was strengthened and new insights into practices were gained. The experience made them think about observation of teaching and how team-teaching could provide an alternative to such developmental activities.

How can such mutual professional development collaborations be encouraged? We both found the collaboration to be a valuable practice-based development opportunity that broke free from workshops and organised activities, one that offered on-the-job and just-in-time development with direct application for all those involved. There are of course resource implications to further spread such developmental collaborations but we wonder if there are specific cases where such an investment could potentially transform learning and teaching and reinvigorate practitioners. Could such activities be cascaded and have a ripple effect?



## 5. Disclosure statement

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